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**Paper title:**

Between the International and the Everyday: Geopolitics and Imaginaries of Home

**Paper abstract:**

The connection between the everyday and the international has received increasing attention in critical IR in recent years. As many contributions aim to rethink the international in terms of the everyday, the mundane and the ordinary become a site of geopolitical analysis. The paper's central idea is that we, as academics and human beings, are constantly faced with what can be called an international political sociology of the everyday in world politics: How is life in "distant" places? Who lives in these places? And what are the people doing "over there?" By reflecting on how we obtain an idea of the everyday of certain places, this paper shifts its focus on representations or, more precisely, imaginations of home and the everyday for particular audiences. Precisely because the mundane can simultaneously be anything, everything, and nothing, it is important to turn to the practices and, in this vein, to the (geo)politics of mediating the everyday to us. In this regard, the paper provides an interpretive reading of two aesthetic texts—a film and a photographic essay—with the purpose of addressing imaginaries of home, the special senses and venues of belonging wherein the everyday takes place, as particular sites of the international. In this way, the paper contributes to current efforts to further decentralize current conceptions of the international.

**Keywords:**

Imaginary, home, film/photography, the everyday/international, Iran, North Korea

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In 2009 the US magazine *Foreign Policy* published a photographic essay entitled “The Land of No Smiles”, which contained seven pictures taken by distinguished photographer Tomas van Houtryve during his trips to North Korea in 2007 and 2008 (Foreign Policy 2009). The essay showed what it described as “stark glimmers of everyday life in the world’s last gulag”. Looking at the photographs, it was striking why, say, passengers riding a tram or people walking the street were considered worth of representation in an outlet that, in fact, provides insight and analysis on global affairs. While part of the answer might be found in North Korea’s status in world politics—a defying nuclear state which is violating human rights—the photo essay points to the essential linkages between the everyday and the international.

This paper conceptualizes the everyday and the international, spanning material and imaginary spheres, as mutually inclusive: what takes place in the everyday affects the international and vice versa. In this vein, the paper construes the everyday as an important venue by which to approach and apprehend the international. The central idea is that we, as academics and human beings, are constantly faced with what can be called an international political sociology of the everyday in world politics: How is life in “distant” places? What are the conditions of living in those places? Who lives there? And what are these people doing “over there”? In other words, the everyday, being a particular instance of the social, becomes a referent object for the international.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 or the revolutionary events in parts of North Africa and the Middle East beginning in 2011 serve as good examples of this. While the recent revolutions were certainly fuelled by people’s desire for political change, often framed in terms of a struggle for liberal values and political freedom, especially in parts of European

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful for the constructive comments received by the editors and the three reviewers. For reading earlier versions of the paper, I would like to thank Dorina Buda, Julian Hanich, Luis Lobo-Guerrero and Saara Särmä. Parts of the paper have been presented at panels of the 2014 Annual Convention of the International Studies Association and the 2014 General Conference of the U4 Network. For research and editorial assistance, I am grateful to Sven Djokic, Tirza van Bruggen and Michal Ovadek.

and US American policy and media circles, they also flourished in these societies because of a widespread dissatisfaction with what can be called issues of daily life and the everyday. That is to say that public discontent with corruption as well as protests against increasing prices and living costs were as much part of the rationality of revolting against the political establishment as demands for political rights and reforms were. To put it simply, the everyday, hence, is (geo)political too.

The following section discusses recent contributions shedding light on the nexus of the everyday and the international. While existing scholarship made important interventions to reconceptualize the international—most notably in *Millennium's* 2007 special issue (see, for example, Kratochwil 2007; Cox 2007; Sylvester 2007) and Mark Salter's 2015 edited volumes on *Making Things International* (2015a, 2015b)—it focuses rather on developments concerning the practice of theorizing in the field of IR or addresses the international from an explicitly materialist perspective. In an attempt to further decentralize notions of the international, this paper takes as its starting point several accounts which attempt to rethink the international as a practice of the everyday (Guillaume 2011a; see also Enloe 2011; Salter 2011).

However, and in contrast to these and other contributions, this paper shifts its focus to representations of home, which are particular imaginations about spaces and senses of being and belonging, and how the international resonates within those. It asks how we obtain an idea of the everyday in “distant” homes and how these intimate spaces of domestic life are imaged and imagined. Home, a rather understudied concept in IR, is conceived of here as being a fundamental material and imaginative site of the everyday. Thus, it provides one of the key junctures whereat the everyday comes into being. This approach rather avoids taking the everyday as given. For precisely because the mundane can be anything and everything and nothing all at the same time, it is important to turn to the practices and, therefore, to the (geo)politics of mediating and imagining sites of the everyday for us.

It makes sense, in this part, to review previous approaches to the everyday in IR, as they have provided new ways of thinking about current practices in international politics.

However, by showing what insights can be gained from discussing imaginaries of home, the paper furthers the already existing studies on the everyday. For that, the subsequent section engages with popular enactments of domestic space in Iran (via the film *A Separation*) and North Korea (via the photographic essay “The Land of No Smiles”)—which constantly oscillate between the ordinary and the extraordinary—and then reflects on the (im)possibilities of imaging and imagining these places as home. The goal is to show how imaginaries of domestic space reflect and help to reframe current understandings of the international. The final section summarizes the paper and discusses its implications for critical engagements with the international.

### **Making Home Everyday in IR**

Traditionally the discipline of International Relations (IR) has dealt with “big questions” concerning (the causes and conditions of) war and peace and conflict and cooperation. So called “high politics”, the notion that only the survival and the security of the state matter in (inter)national politics, dominated, not always unreasonably, much of the field’s research agenda. Seen from this perspective, one could argue rightfully that IR has neglected issues and concerns of daily life and the everyday.

However, a closer look reveals that the everyday is no stranger to the field. In fact, many approaches in IR have, albeit on their own conceptual terms and at different empirical sites, embraced the notion of the everyday. This insight applies in particular to International Political Economy (IPE). This field of study, for instance, examines neoliberal forms of governance of contemporary societies and seeks to analyze how capitalist social relations reach into our everyday life as well as affect the agency of everyday actors (Davies 2006; Elias 2010; Hobson and Seabrooke 2007).

It is relatively safe to say that, within IR (and IPE), feminism was one of (if not) the first approaches which paid particular attention to putatively apolitical issues of the everyday such as homework or childcare (Enloe 1989; Sylvester 1994; Tickner 1992). Proclaiming that

“the personal is political”, feminist approaches helped the field to understand how the lives of marginalized individuals, like diplomats’ spouses, female factory workers and prostitutes, affect, and are affected by, global politics. In particular, such scholars addressed the everyday as a venue of resistance to challenge male practices of power. Furthermore to show how lives of women globally underlie a common logic, which is the exploitation of women’s capacities for male rule, feminists turned to a site of research which can also be described as—and something that is also well-known in more prevalent theories in IR, especially in realism—the so called individual level of analysis.

Realist variants, too, are not unfamiliar with the examination of the everyday at particular empirical sites. For instance, classical realists like Hans J. Morgenthau and Edward H. Carr argued in favor of examining the causes of war by focusing on the individual, usually male, and not, for instance, on the structural or the international level of analysis. Other realist scholars such as Gideon Rose (1998) and Randall Schweller (1996) reformulated classical realism so as to include individual leaders and how they perceive the international distribution of power as an intervening variable in geopolitical inquiries. Important to note is that these realist accounts attempt to address larger questions of international politics by dealing with personal contexts, individual subjects, and the conditions of human nature. In other words, (neo)classical realism favors an approach to people’s lives and the—albeit male-centered and elite-focused—everyday.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Realist variants, as one reviewer of an earlier version of this paper correctly and helpfully pointed out, certainly reveal an elitist focus on the everyday—that of political leaders. In doing that they contrast, for instance, with feminist theories, which have rejected and criticized the elite-biased and male-driven focus of the discipline. However, this “gap” rather hints at differences concerning the *empirical* sites of the everyday. For while realist and feminist accounts examine differing “cases”, they do both agree on the importance of the everyday as an essential *theoretical* site at which to study international political practices. For example, classical realists would focus on a top diplomat’s way of life and how his personal and professional contexts affect the promotion of national interests in, say, negotiating strategic agreements. Feminists, however, would examine the daily life of that diplomat’s wife, coming to the conclusion that diplomacy—or, for that matter, the promotion of national interests—is made possible through the exploitation of the wife’s capacities. While research practice differs in this regard, the everyday—in whatever form or variant it may come—is a common site of analysis for both accounts. Furthermore, whereas differences in the conceptualization of the everyday between those approaches can be noted, the variations also, in fact, exist *within* the same approaches—for example, within feminism. That is to say, as the everyday of top officials in the US diplomatic service is certainly different from, say, the daily life experiences of female factory workers in Bangladesh, so is the latter’s everyday certainly quite unlike the daily life of diplomats’ spouses—something, that would be subject

Realist-inclined Security Studies, too, have experience with addressing the everyday. In particular the concept of human security, popularized ever since the United Nations Development Programme published its Human Development Report 1994 (United Nations Development Programme 1994), provides a powerful acknowledgment of the importance of daily life issues for global affairs. As the concept of human security is far too complex to provide a thorough reflection about its ramifications here (also, this has been done elsewhere better), it should be noted that its basic point is to shift Security Studies' frame of reference from the (security of the) state to the (security of the) individual. Thus, single persons and their conditions of living emerge as objects of analysis for international security studies rather than asking, for instance, how the physical integrity of collective assemblages such as nations and states can be ensured.

In sum academic engagements addressing the site of the everyday are not entirely new, yet recent accounts from critically inclined scholarship in the fields of International Relations, Sociology and Human Geography suggest an emerging interest in questions of the quotidian (see, for example, Davies and Niemann 2002; Davies 2006; Dittmer and Gray 2010; Hviid Jacobsen 2009; Kessler and Guillaume 2002; Moran 2005; Pain and Smith 2008). Some of these authors have explicitly engaged the concept of the everyday in order to expand conceptual venues through which notions of the international can be understood (Guillaume 2011a, 2011b). The goal is to provide answers to the questions of why and how an inquiry into the quotidian is important for studying the international.

While these studies have made important contributions to the rethinking of the international, many have not turned to one of the everyday's most powerful imaginaries: the home. Placing home in the context of the international, as this paper does, benefits critical inquiries in the field. The home is what Alison Blunt and Robert Dowling (2006) call a "spatial

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of feminist analyses. Simply put, and pointing to the variety of different forms of the everyday, the lives of these spouses lay bare traits that are elite, exclusive, and privileged for female workers in Bangladesh (for instance the representation of rights, access to health services and housing). This even applies to fellow members of the same social class, as female factory workers in the US arguably have a different—that is, more privileged—life than their counterparts in Bangladesh do. In this way, the question of elitist everyday—elitist for whom?—is an inevitable part of inquiries into the everyday.

imaginary,” which comprises the various feelings (positive as well as negative), scales, and senses of attachment that are thereby making and remaking place. The home arguably functions as one of the main venues wherein most of the ordinary, repetitive, and routine activities of daily life take place. While home, thus, becomes an integral part of the everyday, the latter in turn becomes inextricably linked to (imaginaries of) place.

Notions of home have pressing relevance for the international, if one thinks for instance of people who are in search of new homes abroad, as in the case of international migration, or those who are forced to flee their homes due to conflict and violence, as in the case of wars. The current migration/refugee crisis unfolding in Europe is a pertinent example of this.<sup>3</sup> The growing influx of people arriving in Europe since the beginning of 2015, being part of what the UN refugee agency has described as the worst migration crisis since World War II, has led to widespread emotional—and often nationalistic—debates about the material and imaginative geographies of home and homeland and belonging and alienation. Parts of these discussions span the questions of where and how to house these refugees (for example in central or peripheral residential areas; in tents, containers, or houses), who are mostly from conflict zones in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria; whether and how (Christian) European societies can or should provide a home for their new (Muslim) members; and, to what extent domestic spaces in Europe are now being subject to change by the inflow of foreign cultures.

Another well known, albeit highly controversial, example of the home as a particular site of the international is the demolition practices of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), which destroy the homes and houses of militants and suspects (as well as of their relatives) in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The aims of these house demolitions are, among other things, to counter insurgencies and deter militant activities in the occupied territories, according to

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<sup>3</sup> The question of whether the crisis in Europe is a “migration” or rather a “refugee” one points to ambiguities in the public and official discourses. Making sense of these people in a discourse of “migration” or “flight” has important (geo)political implications. Since refugees are subjects entitled to protection under the terms of the Geneva Convention and of other (inter)national agreements, they have a right, so to speak, to homemaking—that is, to make the newly found place a home. This, however, does not apply to migrants, who are often prevented from exercising such legally enshrined rights.



the IDF. While these tactics have, at times, little military or strategic value, because, for instance, these buildings are already empty or because the suicide bombers have already killed themselves and others, destroying (material) homes and houses arguably serves also other, say, more imaginative purposes. These purposes or desires relate to the attempts to erase the everyday sites of being and belonging of Palestinians. What follows is that home becomes deeply entrenched in geopolitical practices. Or, to put it differently, the international too is inextricably linked to (imaginaries of) place.

Recent studies have addressed home as an essential site of the international. Benefitting, for instance, from insights from what is known as “New Materialism,” scholars have highlighted the (geo)political force of place and physical environments (see, for example, Coward 2009; Mountz 2011; Salter 2015a, 2015b). For instance, in his acclaimed monograph *Urbicide*, Martin Coward outlines how the deliberate destruction of built-up places such as homes is often an end in itself for military planners. Instead of targeting specific individuals or enemy groups, the destruction of homes, bridges, and other such buildings, Coward argues, constitutes a particular form of political violence: urbicide. As Coward makes the case for the (geo)political significance of materiality—namely by understanding the meaning of built-up places being deliberately destroyed—home emerges primarily as a physical location of belonging; “a house as a home” (see also Miller 2001, as well as the wide-ranging literature on what is called Housing Studies).

For others, however, home is more than a material residence; “a house is not a home.” Acknowledging the importance of the material spaces of social life, scholars have highlighted also the imaginative geographies of home within which power and (geo)politics operate (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Brickell 2012; Gorman-Murray and Dowling 2007). A good example of this is Katherine Brickell’s (2012) work on the geopolitics of home. In aiming to nurture home as a venue of geopolitical struggle, in which different collective assemblages are giving meaning (for example the nation, the neighborhood, one’s own street), she spans across the conceptual boundaries that separate the private sphere of domestic life from the

extra-domestic space of geopolitics. The deliberate coalescing of both realms thus serves her goal of exploring how geopolitics is affected by home.

What becomes clear through these engagements—but also by recalling the examples of migration and of the IDF—is that home can be articulated and examined across spatial scales. That is to say, while home can be an actual domestic space—meaning the material manifestation of belonging—it can simultaneously also be a city, a country, or even more (or less) beside. In this vein, home is theorized in this paper as being a *trans-scalar* imagination. While this chosen conceptualization is not meant to revisit the rich debate about ontologies and epistemologies of scale (see, in particular, Jonas 2006; Leitner and Miller 2007; Marston, Jones III, and Woodward 2005; Jones III, Woodward, Marston 2007), who have debated extensively whether it would be wise to abandon altogether scale in Geography or not), it is simply to note that home should not be understood as being apart from political worlds—but rather constituted through them (Blunt and Dowling 2006). In this sense the paper adds to existing scholarship on the everyday, imaginaries of home that are construed as particular sites of, and engage with, the international. The goal is thus to broaden the theoretical junctures through which the international can be approached.

For the discussion in the following section, it is important to note that if critical scholarship agrees that the “mundane matters” (Enloe 2011) then there is also the need to ask how the mundane is mediated to us—that is, how it is imaged and imagined, for instance in film and photography. For, as many studies have similarly argued (for example Bleiker et al. 2014; Campbell 2011; Debrix and Weber 2003; Lisle 2014; Hall 1997; Schwartz and Ryan 2003), what people know of “distant” places also depends on how these places are made visible to them in the first place. Thus, the study of images matters too for IR scholarship as, to put it simply, our ways of seeing the world are always also our ways of knowing the world. This, in turn, has consequences for how we are able to understand, but also to act and react toward, the everyday of other places—or at least what is considered the everyday. In this sense, the paper takes a step back and, in contrast to existing scholarship on the everyday, challenges the taken-for-grantedness of the quotidian. In other words, the everyday is not

just “out there”, waiting to be imag(in)ed. It comes into being by the very practice of imag(in)ing—in this paper’s case, filmic and photographic enactments of home and the everyday in Iran and North Korea. Important to note in this regard is that visual media are not necessarily mirroring space and place as they *are* (representation), but rather tell us how space and place is *imagined to be* (imaginaries). Therefore, reading film and photography means to be aware of the positionality of the image maker and, not of lesser importance, the commissioner.<sup>4</sup> In this way, these media are visual imaginaries (which participate in constructing notions) of space, place and site and say much more about, put differently, the messenger than the message. The next section engages with particular imaginaries of home, and discusses how they function as instances of the international.

### **Imaging and Imagining Home**

As noted above, the everyday and the international are connected to places and one of those is the home. Good examples for these multifarious linkages are the paper’s two sites of analysis: Iran and North Korea. Two recent, albeit very different, interventions deserve a mention in this regard.

One is the Iranian film drama *A Separation* directed by filmmaker Asghar Farhadi which, among others, won the 2012 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. The other is the photographic essay “The Land of No Smiles”, taken by renowned American photographer Tomas van Houtryve, which appeared 2009 in the magazine *Foreign Policy*. Both accounts seem to be wide apart in terms of, for instance, medium (motion pictures versus still images), genre (fiction versus non-fiction), origin (domestic versus foreign visions of home and the everyday) and political geography (Middle East versus East Asia).

However, examining these differing media forms, whose viewing is part of people’s everyday life, is not necessarily a methodological constraint if one follows, for instance,

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<sup>4</sup> Certainly, there is also a particular positionality involved in the reader of such images, me, which, in turn, says something about myself concerning the way what and how I (de)emphasize things.

Michael Shapiro's approach to what he calls "writing-as-method" (Shapiro 2013).<sup>5</sup> The purpose of juxtaposing texts from different genres—in his terms creating a montage which he, in turn, borrows from Walter Benjamin—is not to validate certain knowledge claims or the truth of particular statements. Rather, and to paraphrase Shapiro, the value of engaging these aesthetic texts lies in the way how a subjective reading is able to prompt critical thinking (ibid. 31). The purpose then is to dissolve disciplinary/genre boundaries and to open up new avenues for critical visual inquiries (see also Rose 2011). This concern is also shared by an increasing number of scholars who are working at the intersection of popular culture and world politics (see, for instance, Caso and Hamilton 2015; Griffin 2015; Kiersey and Neumann 2014; Shepard 2013). By juxtaposing different cultural artefacts, these studies provide, among other things, new ways of thinking about cross-media methodologies. For instance, Penny Griffin (2015) analyzes in her work on the international political economy of feminism a broad range of different media formats including advertisements, music, film, and social media platforms. In doing so, Griffin is able to reveal an underlying impetus—namely making certain forms of (anti)feminism more acceptable through their representation in popular culture—that cuts across these generic boundaries. Addressing the visual in the film and photographic essay studied in this paper is also important, because its central articulation—functioning as *the* referent mode of the real—shimmers through both aesthetic texts.

Moreover, what connects the film and the photo essay in an essential way is that they articulate the same narrative: telling a story about whether and if so how the everyday of these places is home—not least through the sequential ordering of the visual. While this structuring of images enhances the narrative function of these works in contrast to, say,

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<sup>5</sup> As one reviewer correctly pointed out, both aesthetic texts are a form of elite interpretation of the everyday—in that they reflect the perspectives of, say, film producers, professional photographers, and editors, and not of "ordinary" people. While differentiating along the lines of elite/non-elite does make sense and is worthy of consideration when it comes to representations of the everyday, the paper's core impetus, as becomes clear in the following, is a different one. Working with the assumption that no aesthetic text, regardless of its (elite/non-elite) producer, provides an unmediated access to the everyday, the subsequent sections thus highlight the politics of juxtaposing a *vernacular* vision of home and the everyday (the Iranian film) with a *foreign* vision thereof (the US American photo essay).

single and isolated images, they, more importantly, provide a visual sociology of domestic space by giving answers to the questions of how life is “over there,” how being and belonging look like, who inhabit these places, and what the people are doing there. It becomes clear that both texts facilitate a reading of home as a trans-scalar imagination. This enables viewers to infer the character of the people and places which are depicted and allows to make meaningful statements about their intimate spaces of living, being, and dwelling.

In this way, both aesthetic texts are particular articulations of the everyday in that they engage with imaginaries of home that refer both to the possibilities and impossibilities of having a home or, more precisely, considering these places as home. In this regard, they reproduce and/or challenge geopolitical imaginations about daily life in Iran and North Korea and, hence, establish the home as an instance of the international.

### *Leaving Home*

Farhadi's film about an upper-middle-class Iranian couple and their life in Teheran has made big headlines in the news since it was first released in 2011. The film's reception corresponds with increasing international attention now being paid to Iranian domestic affairs: the nationwide protests in 2009 and 2010 against the results of the Iranian presidential elections, sometimes referred to as the “Green revolution,” raised awareness of the political conditions in Iran among a global audience. Critically acclaimed and commercially successful, *A Separation* won a number of the most prestigious international film awards including the Golden Bear for Best Film at the 2011 Berlin International Film Festival, the 2012 Golden Globe Award, and, as mentioned above, an Oscar in the Best Foreign Language Film category. The success of an Iranian film in the United States is not only remarkable given both nations' often hostile relationship with each other—*A Separation*, which was competing also with an Israeli submission, was the first-ever film from Iran to win an Oscar—but is also significant in terms of its broadening the scope of audiences: the film is reaching global (for example “Western”) public eyes and thus reflecting a growing international recognition of

Iranian filmmaking and storytelling (see, for example, Child 2012). Speaking to a global audience by telling stories of home and the everyday, *A Separation* thus warrants a thorough reading of its politics of representation.

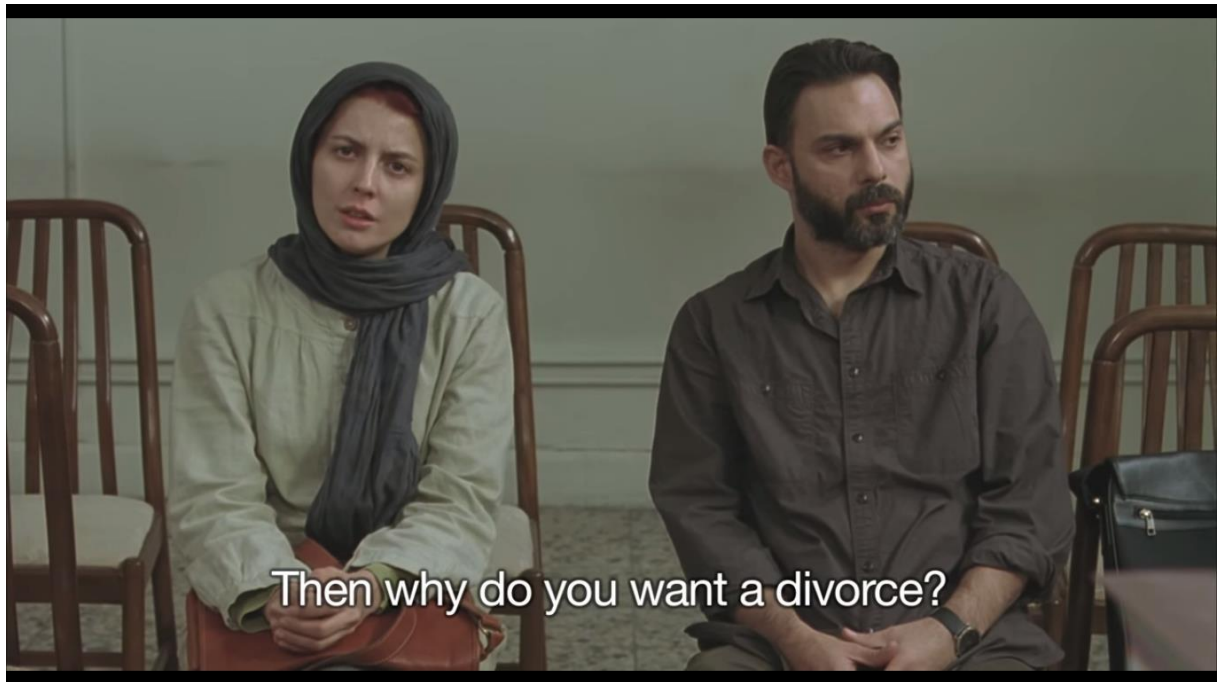
*A Separation* contains basically two narrative threads which are interlinked. One, and whose reading is more highlighted here, is about the imminent divorce between Simin and Nadar, the film's leading characters. Simin files for a divorce because she wants the couple to move abroad, hoping to build new lives for themselves and their eleven-year-old daughter Termeh. Her husband Nadar wants to stay because he has to take care of his father who suffers from the Alzheimer disease. While Simin does not specify where she would like the couple to go, she states, when asked by the judge why she does not want to raise her daughter in Iran, "the conditions" in the country would motivate her to depart. Asking what conditions in Iran she meant, the judge and, by extension, the viewer gets no response.

As the film starts with this scene, which is also shot from the perspective of the magistrate thereby effectively disembodifying and effacing politico-judicial power of the ruling domestic establishment, the audience is not only put in the position to judge the couple but ultimately left to answer the question Simin has raised with pointing to "the conditions" in her homeland (see Figure 1).<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1: Film still from the opening scene of *A Separation* taken from a YouTube video

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<sup>6</sup> I thank Julian Hanich for pointing out to me the effacing effect of this cinematic perspective.



Since the film also concludes with a scene in front of a faceless judge—Termeh sits in front of the magistrate and is about to tell him with whom she chooses to live, while her parents wait outside in the hallway— this narrative structuring frames the film and, more importantly, its reading to highlight the personal and everyday (albeit tragic) story of a married couple in modern society (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Film still from the concluding scene of *A Separation* taken from a YouTube video



With the moving out of Simin of the joint apartment to her parents, and Nadar now needing someone to take care of his father while he is at work, the second narrative thread of the film begins. Hiring Razieh, a devout pregnant woman from the poor suburb, Nadar soon finds that she is unable to cope with the care of his father. One day Nadar and Termeh return home and find his father unconscious on the floor with one hand tied to his bed. Razieh, who was supposed to stay in the apartment and appears to have gone on her own errands, comes back later being accused by Nadar of neglecting his father and stealing money from his room (not knowing that Simin used the money to pay the moving company). After a verbal dispute about the mistreatment of Nadar's father and the insistence of Razieh on her innocence requesting the payment for her day's work, Nadar pushes her roughly out of the apartment. Learning that Razieh has suffered a miscarriage blaming Nadar, a court is assigned to determine his potential responsibility. As the legal dispute between the two families begins to unfold, the viewer observes how all main cast members are faced with difficult ethical decisions and develops an understanding for each of the characters choices.

One of the reasons why *A Separation* has been successful and highly acknowledged in a number of countries including Israel and the United States, Iran's most notorious



adversaries in international politics, is, because it deals with issues that the outside world, apparently and as trivial as it may sound, has not imagined to exist in Iran: everyday lives. After all, *A Separation* is a film about issues known to every modern society. It describes the divisions between partners, genders, families, values, and social classes that take place in the home, workplace, school, and administrative office—all familiar spaces of contemporary social life. In this way, the film speaks directly to a global audience.

Though having won many international awards in the category of best foreign language film, *A Separation* is not foreign at all. It does not depict or serve popular expectations about the country's religious leaders or political dignitaries who play the nuclear card, but focusses instead on people and how they maneuver through the dilemmas and tragedies of daily life.<sup>7</sup> This is also noted in the congratulatory statement of the US Department of State. By stating that Farhadi “has given the world an invaluable picture of life in Iran”, it points, to put it briefly, to the linkages between the domestic and the foreign (US Department of State 2012).

What these brief lines reveal, and which arguably apply to a broader reading of the film, is that viewers are able to connect to the characters and, more importantly, to *Iranian* imaginaries of home. In other words, Farhadi's story about the couple does not only provide a counter imagery/imaginary to current beliefs about Iran, but enables the audience to find, in short, the familiar in the unfamiliar, the ordinary in the extraordinary, the self in the other and, after all, the international in the everyday. A good example of the dissolution of such boundaries articulated through the film is a comment by a leading Israeli film critic. Noting that many of his countrymen and women were surprised to see that Iranians do not seem all that different from themselves, Yair Raveh observed “ultimately you don't think about nuclear

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<sup>7</sup> Another recent visual-spatial enactment of Iran, *Argo*, stands in stark contrast to *A Separation*. Being awarded, among others, the 2013 Academy Award for Best Picture, thereby revealing a certain irony after Farhadi's film won an Oscar in the previous year, *Argo* constructs Iran as a place of hostility, danger and religious fanaticism. Important to note here is that Ben Affleck's picture about the successful exfiltration of six American diplomats – in which the medium film is used as a cover – is strongly driven by the notion of domestic space as *Argo*'s main narrative is about bringing these people home.

bombs or dictators threatening world peace. You see them driving cars and going to movies and they look exactly like us [Israelis]" (Child 2012).

Since *A Separation*, which also competed with an Israeli entry at the Academy Awards, deals with everyday ethics, it challenges many geopolitical conceptions about Iran in a fundamental way. This is for instance reflected in Farhadi's acceptance speech which he delivered after receiving the Oscar:

At this time, many Iranians all over the world are watching us and I imagine them to be very happy. They are happy not just because of an important award or a film or filmmaker, but because at the time when talk of war, intimidation, and aggression is exchanged between politicians, the name of their country Iran is spoken here through her glorious culture, a rich and ancient culture that has been hidden under the heavy dust of politics. I proudly offer this award to the people of my country, a people who respect all cultures and civilizations and despise hostility and resentment.

Farhadi's speech, rather a conscious statement than being a spontaneous comment, is remarkable for a couple of reasons. His dedication of the Oscar to the Iranian people ("I proudly offer this award to the people of my country") is similar to the film's subject which focus on people or, more precisely, *ordinary* people in contrast to, say, extraordinary high officials like political and religious leaders. In this way he, again, makes a distinction between people and politics, highlighting in a sense the everyday as opposed to the international.

Furthermore, while the "talk of war, intimidation, and aggression" is reminiscent of the everyday practices in current world politics,<sup>8</sup> Farhadi provides a geopolitical reading of his film ("war, intimidation, and aggression", "heavy dust of politics") by contrasting Iranian and international politics with the importance of Iranian culture (and people) and the role it could play in contributing towards a better understanding of his country in global affairs ("the name of their country Iran is spoken here through her glorious culture, a rich and ancient culture

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<sup>8</sup> I thank Saara Särmä for pointing this out to me.

that has been hidden under the heavy dust of politics”). To put it simply, the everyday is expressed here in terms of the international. In this way, the international provides the narrative frame through which imaginaries of home and the everyday can be understood.

However, and in concluding this section, the film provides us also with another take and this requires going back to one of its main narrative threads. While, as mentioned above, the film is about multi-layered divisions in people’s life and in Iranian society,<sup>9</sup> it is also a story about the spatial separation from domestic spaces. After all, Simin, the female lead character, sees no alternative but to leave the house *and* Iran—both material and imaginative geographies of home—being willing to sacrifice her current life and attachment to her family. It is precisely in this way that *A Separation* can be viewed in light of how imaginaries of home and domesticity echo and enhance our understanding of the international. Because of “the conditions” in Iran, which are openly mentioned in the introductory scene thereby affecting the reading of the (message of the) film, there is no other way forward but to leave behind house and homeland and thereafter move abroad. Iran becomes a place that has to be abandoned. While it was home, it no longer can function as home.

### *Having No Home*<sup>10</sup>

The abovementioned photo series “The Land of No Smiles,” which was also published in the online version of *Foreign Policy*, has gained widespread recognition in the public domain. During the first few days of its publication, the photo essay received more than 400,000 clicks according to its photographer and author Tomas van Houtryve and became a finalist in

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<sup>9</sup> Farhadi’s film is a statement about the situation of the Iranian people in Iran. Asked in an interview about what elements in *A Separation* speak particularly to the Iranian audience, Farhadi responds enigmatically: “If you’ve lived in Iran for the last few years, you would know exactly what is Iranian in it, and I don’t think I want to elaborate beyond that,” cited in Hamid 2011. The implicit criticism of the film and its endorsement by a wider international public explains why official Iranian authorities, though approving it beforehand when granting permission to produce and exporting the film, reacted cautiously to the success of *A Separation*.

<sup>10</sup> Here I draw on and expand previous reflections on the politics of representing North Korea’s everyday (see Shim 2014a).

the prestigious National Magazine Awards competition for photojournalism of 2010. What makes “The Land of No Smiles” interesting and worthy of study for critical IR scholarship—apart from the widespread recognition and acclamation of the photographer for his North Korea pictures<sup>11</sup>—is its re-articulation of the everyday as an integral part and principal site of the international. In providing a discussion about how the photo essay functions and what sense of place is mediated by it as a result, the analysis revisits its central claim: that the everyday of this place is no home—something which also resonates strongly throughout contemporary geopolitical imaginations about North Korea.

This photo essay is structured so as to re-enact, in visual terms, the photographer’s travels through North Korean sites, specifically by following the linear pattern of the beginning (Pyongyang), middle (Kaesong), and return (Pyongyang). This narrative structuring, which purposefully orders the images into a particular sequence, elevates “The Land of No Smiles” to the practice of writing: it becomes a photo essay and tells a story. Important to note as well is the fact that the ordering of the essay into a coherent sequence enhances its rhetorical force (cf. Shapiro 1988).

The way in which the visual storytelling of the essay is put to work relates also to the interplay between images, text, and titles. For instance, while the introductory remarks suggest a partial representation of domestic space (“Pyongyang and its people”), the work’s main title indicates the intended complete depiction of North Korea (“The Land of No Smiles”). In other words, the photo essay makes use of the signifying effects of the synecdoche; a figure of speech after which a part comes to stand for the whole (see also, Chandler 2007). The key point to mention in this regard is how this synecdochic articulation conveys a particular understanding of place. As a synecdoche establishes a causal link between the part and the whole, the transference of certain spatial qualities from the part (distanced milieus, isolated spaces) onto the whole appears to be entirely natural. This articulation

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<sup>11</sup> Some of van Houtryve’s North Korea pictures were republished in a number of different media outlets worldwide, including *Time*, *Life*, and the Swiss publication *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. He also received the 2012 World Understanding Award in the Pictures of the Year International Contest for his photobook *Behind the Curtains*, which featured the images of the photo essay.

facilitates the conclusion that the spatial whole is, or proceeds in the same way as, the part, which is the result of the aforementioned interplay between images, accompanying text, and titles. Since we are shown the partial “glimmers of everyday life,” we come to know that North Korea is a “Land of No Smiles.”<sup>12</sup>

Much of how the photo essay envisions space and place stems arguably from the differing positionality that it inheres in contrast to Farhadi’s film. While *A Separation* is an Iranian film shot by an Iranian director, also officially sanctioned by Iranian censorship through the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, making it thus a *vernacular* vision of home, the photo essay is a (double) *foreign* imaginary of North Korean domestic space and the everyday as the pictures were not only taken but also selected by American individuals and editorial staff members. As a result, “The Land of No Smiles” constructs wholly different ways of seeing and knowing home.

This is not to question the accuracy of photographic depictions per se. Rather, the point is to be aware that specific representations always depend on a particular understanding of who or what is worth of representation—by the photographer *and* the editorial team who select certain pictures for publication. A representation in this sense is then always an interpretation, or, put another way, an imagination of the image maker. As such the politics of positionality, as mentioned earlier, reveals itself in these images, in that they say much more about foreign—or, more precisely, American—desires and imaginations than they do about North Korea’s actual everyday. As a consequence, “The Land of No Smiles” is rather a reflection of how “real” life is imagined by the photographer and editors of these pictures, because, to put it simply, imaging cannot be separated from imagining. It follows that foreign imaginations of North Korea’s daily life affect how domestic spaces and the everyday are shown to external audiences.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> As a capital city tends to be the administrative, cultural, and political center of a country, one that enjoys many unique rights and privileges, everyday life in Pyongyang—and the representations thereof—can thus be expected to be different from in other parts of North Korea.

<sup>13</sup> The positionality of the photo essay also gives rise to ethical questions and points of concern regarding relations of power when depicting “foreign” people and places to “home” audiences. As the image makers—the photographer and the editorial team—arguably did not ask the depicted subjects

These links can be examined on the basis of the (overlapping) themes that are considered to be the ones worthy of representation in the photo essay. Easily corresponding with popular imaginations about the geographies of home in North Korea, they depict the emptiness of social spaces such as streets and shops (“Uneasy Street,” “Shop Girl”), the monotony of state propaganda in public and private life (“Billboard Hit,” “Cult of Personality”), the darkness of urban venues (“Canary Underground,” “Uneasy Street,” “Shop Girl”), and the bleakness of local labor (“Shop Girl,” “Collectivist Commute,” “Emergency ‘Capitalism’”) in the country. Furthermore, giving an account of North Korea as a site defined in terms only of what it lacks—no people, no light, no freedom, no smiles, meaning that it is, ultimately, not a place of life—corresponds with contemporary geopolitical imaginaries of North Korean domestic space. In particular various US administrations, as well as allies including South Korea and Japan, have continuously depicted North Korea in terms of danger, darkness, and desolation.

A good example of this is current US Secretary of State John Kerry who, in an interview on the occasion of the release of a UN report about North Korea’s labor camps, described North Korea as an “evil, evil place” and as “one of the most closed and cruel places on Earth” (US Department of State 2014). What makes Kerry’s remarks interesting is that he is using a geographical concept (place) for describing and judging what is, effectively, due to the behavior of a particular collective (action). In this vein, he establishes a nexus between subjectivity and spatiality in the sense that actions and deeds of a few (albeit powerful) become the qualitative signifiers for the material and imaginative geographies of North Korea. In other words, the entirety of North Korea cannot but be “evil”, “closed” and “cruel” (ibid.).<sup>14</sup> In this mold, Kerry indicates how geopolitical practice (for example

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for permission to photograph them and display the images to a wider public (something which, ironically, has to be done when reproducing these very images), this relationship of looking is inherently unequal: they represent, while the others are being represented; they are looking, while the others are being looked at; they are active, while the others are passive.

<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, while Kerry emphasizes that North Korea must be held accountable for the violation of human rights, he does not mention that the US administration is withholding reconnaissance imagery of these sites even though, as the same report deplores, it could play a greater role in clarifying the issues at hand and potentially contribute to making the North Korean leadership responsible for its

international condemnation, UN inquiries) relates to geographical imagination. Put differently, Kerry's statement points to the linkages between notions of the domestic and of the international.

What can be inferred from the above discussed portrayals is the mediation of a particular notion of home as a trans-scalar imagination. Since North Korea is characterized by permanent exclusion and exception, the people living—or implicitly trapped—inside the country can only hope to escape. In this sense, we assume North Koreans to be awaiting liberation, freedom, and democracy because their native country is imaged and imagined as a giant prison that can only be abandoned. As a result, we expect them to have a more satisfying life once they have deserted their homeland—also due to such generic representations/imaginings—because anything must be better than to be or to live in North Korea. However, the post-exodus experience of North Koreans indicates that such kind of geopolitical equation is not that simple as they continue to face personal struggle, economic hardship and social discrimination in their host countries, in particular in South Korea, where most of these people live today.

Important to note here is the sense of place that is created by such visual-verbal narratives. North Korea seems to exist outside of the modern world and even outside of time. It is not only unable to change but also caught in an eternal past. Represented in this way, it becomes clear what North Korea was not, is not and will never be: home. The implication of this articulation—resembling the discussion of *A Separation*, in that imaginaries of home reflect a particular understanding of the international—is that there is no choice but to leave what is in fact for many North Koreans a uniquely special place of being and belonging.<sup>15</sup>

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human rights violations. The withholding of these pictures points to the geopolitics of sight: actors are only able to see, and therefore to know, certain things and developments by virtue of someone else granting or denying vision. See also Shim 2014b.

<sup>15</sup> Interviews conducted with North Koreans living now in South Korea reveal that many still have positive views about North Korea's military or political leadership. Moreover, though having experienced hardships in North Korea, they are not inclined to hide their sympathy towards their homeland (see, for example, McCurry 2014). While it could be argued that this is due to the ideological indoctrination they were exposed to in North Korea – evoking strong associations of “the brainwashed North Korean” incapable of expressing free will – such a reading, more importantly, rejects the

## Conclusion

In July 2013, PayPal, an American e-commerce business and subsidiary of eBay, blocked sales of a photo book for having the word “Iranian” in its title (Lasky 2013). Commissioned by Fabrica, an associate facility of Italian fashion company Benetton, *Iranian Living Room* contains pictures of 15 young Iranian photographers portraying domestic space and life in Iran. In a response to mounting criticism and public interest, PayPal apologized for putting the book on the company’s blacklist and explained it tried to comply with the sanctions regulations enforced by the US Department of Treasury, which oversees the trade embargo against Iran. What is particularly ironic in this brief episode is that mundane depictions of Iranian spaces of domestic life have been subjected to larger questions of world politics. While the incident serves as a reminder of the constant interplay between the ordinary and the extraordinary of Iranian domestic space, it gives an idea of how home and the everyday are connected to the international.

The purpose of the paper was to engage the everyday as a site of geopolitical importance. Its basic point was that we as researchers and persons are permanently confronted with an international political sociology of the quotidian in world politics: How is life in distant places? Who lives in these places? And what are the people doing “over there”? Since IR, broadly understood, has traditionally dealt with so called “high politics”, issues and concerns of everyday life appear to have been neglected. To speak in terms of one dominant approach in the field, IR rather did not ask what one level of analysis (the everyday) can add to the understanding of another level of analysis (the international). However, it was shown that the everyday is not an unfamiliar site of inquiry in the field and is, in fact, embraced in multiple ways.

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possibility of genuine affinity and belonging towards what was as a matter of fact their home. Put it differently, such an understanding functions according to “it cannot be what may not be.”



In a further attempt to subvert notions of the international, this paper has asked how we get an idea of the everyday. For that purpose, it used the concept of home and discussed imaginaries of domestic space and life in Iran and North Korea. Though different in many aspects, as laid out in the previous sections, *A Separation*, the Iranian film about a couple that is facing divorce and a legal dispute, and “The Land of No Smiles”, a photographic essay about what its makers consider daily life in North Korea, revolve around the notion of home, that is whether these places can be considered as home. Both discussions have shown why engagements with the everyday are important as they entail ethical questions which, in the end, can help us to better understand or prompt us to distance ourselves from unknown people and places. While *A Separation* articulates a narrative of leaving home, “The Land of No Smiles” deals with the impossibility of regarding North Korea as home thereby insinuating the only possible option is escape. In this mold, imaginaries of domestic space and life reflect and reproduce a particular understanding of the international. Addressing home as a concept that traverses different spatial scales was intended to highlight that home is not separated from different layered political worlds, but in fact constituted throughout them (Blunt and Dowling 2006).

What does this mean for the analysis of international relations? First, it means that we have to be aware that world politics is (always) driven by the concern of home and the everyday. Kerry’s remarks (“evil, evil place”), for example, remind us that geopolitical reasoning is affected by spatial imaginaries. For the way or ways in which people come to know the world through visual imagery affects how they act toward that world. Therefore, it is important to ask not only *what* the everyday is but also consider *how* we get an idea of the everyday—in fact, typically of people and places that are far away from us like Iran and North Korea.

This means, second, that theory-driven research on the politics of representation is of continuing importance to IR because of the widespread employment—and therefore consequences—of seeing as a way of knowing in global affairs. Examining this logic across different visual artefacts—in this paper’s case, tracing home as a trans-scalar imagination in

filmic and photographic representations—is, however, also of methodological value as it contributes to pluralistic aesthetic inquiries. Finally, if we begin thinking of our everyday in the same way as we conceive of the everyday in “distant” places—for instance by engaging the (im)possibilities of leaving/having a home and questioning the normativity of “our” everyday or way of life, enabling, hence, an-other perspective on difference—this would contribute to reimagining one of the most, literally spoken, constitutive terms in the field of IR: the international.

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